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ABSTRACT

This review of a research institute's evaluation of the national Follow Through program asserts that both the contracting office and the research institute failed to adequately specify the kind of study intended and the functions which it proposed to serve. One of several kinds of evaluation studies might have been undertaken: (1) a research study, demonstrating relationships between variables to provide hypotheses for program approaches, (2) a summative evaluation of the national program, (3) a summative evaluation of the relative effectiveness of various sponsor programs in achieving the Follow Through objectives, or (4) a formative evaluation, providing information to the decision-maker useful in modifying the program or in understanding outcome differences. It is difficult to make specific recommendations because of the lack of study definition. General recommendations are: (a) that the institute's evaluation study be continued for one more year since preliminary data collection has already been done, (b) the study focus be clarified, with the assistance of an outside panel, and (c) the best approach for the coming year would probably be alternative (3), listed above. (Author/NH)

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A REVIEW OF THE EVALUATION OF THE FOLLOW THROUGH PROGRAM*

by

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The Follow Through program was established under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and subsequent amendments. The act authorized:

> A program to be known as Follow Through focused primarily on children in kindergarten or elementary school who are previously enrolled in Head Start or similar programs and designed to provide comprehensive services and parent participation activities...which the director finds will aid in the continued development of children in their full potential...[Section 222(A)]

There are currently 161 Follow Through projects in 140 communities. Nineteen persons or organizations function as Follow Through program sponsors, i.e., as the designers or "model makers" of the experimental approaches that make up Follow Through. Those who have devised the program maintain that each Follow Through project is an example of deliberate attempts to field a wide array of experimental compensatory programs. In summary, the Follow Through program nationally is composed of what is purported to be "161 experiments in education theory and practice placed in 140 communities which adapt them according to the local socio-cultural-political context."

The United States Office of Education contracted with a research institute "to develop information useful in judging the extent to which each project is bringing about desirable changes in students and the communities." The institute has been engaged in this evaluation project for two years. The intent of this paper is to provide a review and critique of the work performed by the institute.

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The greatest deficiency of the evaluation project is its failure to provide adequate specification of the kind of study it is intended to be and the functions which it proposes to serve. The evaluation group cannot be held alone responsible for this deficiency. The Follow Through project is itself a research and development activity and, as such, has undergone considerable modifications during the past years. As a consequence, partially, of this lack of definitiveness in program description and, because of other general changes that might have occurred in the project, the responsible Office of Education officials have not provided adequate specification of the objectives and purposes of the study. The research institute, however, is not blameless; if they accepted four million dollars in evaluation funds, it should be expected that they would have been more aggressive in demanding clarification of the objectives and the decision-making purposes.

There appears to be faulty conception on the part of the institute, as well as Follow Through officials, regarding the various purposes served by evaluation studies in contradistinction to research studies, and in the kinds of evaluation studies that might have been undertaken. There are several courses that the study might have followed:

1. Research Study. It might have been felt that the nature of the program was relatively exploratory, that there were few clear cut objectives relative to the anticipated outcomes of specific Follow Through programs, and that what was most important was an analysis of the relationships between inputs to systems and between various processes (procedures) employed within programs, and a wide variety of potentially important outcome dimensions.

Such a study would not have required the previous selection of outcomes nor the specification of specific decision areas of concern on the part of a decision-maker or body. Rather, it would have been viewed as a research study which would demonstrate interesting and informative relationships between variables to provide hypotheses that might be considered in developing a specific number of finite program approaches considered potentially most feasible. In light of the failure of the institute to state adequately the objectives under examination and, instead, to concentrate on a wide variety of variable dimensions, one must conclude that the above function, perhaps, is what they most nearly had in mind.

2. Summative Evaluation: The National Program. On the other hand, if one is to take seriously the title of the proposal, "Longitudinal Evaluation of the National Follow Through, 1970-71," then one must be dismayed at what is proposed; for such a title suggests that what is to be evaluated is the national program. If that is the case, then the implicit policy question relates to the extent to which the program (namely, the total national Follow Through program) is achieving the objectives stipulated in the legislation. Such evaluative information, one might conclude, is necessary in order to reach decisions, for example, about whether Follow Through should be expanded, modified, maintained, or curtailed. If this were the desired function of the study, then the procedure would be to obtain from the Follow Through program directors the operationally stated objectives of the national Follow Through program which they had developed as "the first step" in operationalizing the intent of Congress as implied from the legislation. If these objectives had not been developed, then

it would appear that the institute's first responsibility would be to develop such operational objectives in concert with those in the Follow Through program. The main purpose of the study, in such an instance, would be to determine the extent to which the national program, in all its complexity and with all its variations, is achieving the stipulated objectives of the program. If this approach represents the intended evaluation function, then one of the main criticisms must center on the inappropriateness of the evaluator reporting directly to the Follow Through branch. It does not appear to be a particularly viable course of action to provide a situation where the evaluator reports to the individuals whose work he is critiquing. It would have been more appropriate to have the institute report directly to BESE or to the PPE section of BESE.

If this national evaluation is indeed the intent, then the second main difficulty of the proposal is the failure to state the objectives of the national program. Without such a list of objectives, operationally stated, one can only guess as to the relevance of the outcome variables and the measures selected by the institute and the reason for their use.

3. Summative Evaluation: The Sponsor Programs of National Follow Through. A third major function that might be served by the study would be the evaluation of the relative effectiveness of various sponsor programs in achieving the Follow Through objectives. That is, one considers that the Follow Through branch has a number of different program approaches, each designed for accomplishing the objectives of the national Follow Through program. (For, if they were not intended to accomplish the objectives of the national program, surely they would not have been accepted as alternatives).

In this instance, the kind of decision envisioned by the decision-maker as a result of the evaluation information is related to the potential deletion of programs, encouragement of others, or perhaps mandating of a particular approach. If a summative evaluation of the type specified in this section is indeed what was desired, then there are, again, several modifications of the present proposal that would be in order. For example:

a. The title of the study might well be changed to "An Evaluation of the Sponsor Programs in the National Follow Through Program."

b. There is a need to state in operational terms the objectives of the national Follow Through program.

c. A procedure needs to be determined for ordering the objectives in terms of priority. This is necessary because of the likelihood that the list of specified objectives would be so great that it would not be physically possible to measure all of them.

d. If limitation of the objectives is necessary, the research institute should select the objectives of highest priority for further examination.

e. The appropriate measures for each of the selected objectives should be determined. (While the institute has selected a number of variables descriptive of outcome dimensions, it is not possible to determine whether these measures are appropriate without having first determined the objectives).

f. Modifications in the collection and analysis of information would undoubtedly need to be made, in terms of the study previously alluded to, in order to provide the desired kind of relevant information to the decision-maker.

PS 003668

4. Formative Evaluation. The second and third studies previously specified are summative kinds of evaluation studies. That is, at the conclusion of the program, they provide information to the decision-maker about the performance of the program. Among those working in the area of evaluation, a distinction has been made between summative and formative kinds of evaluation. The purpose of a formative study is to provide information to the decision-maker, during the course of the operation of the program, in order to allow for modifications of the program at that time. The Center for the Study of Evaluation, UCLA, has referred to formative kinds of evaluation as "implementation evaluation" and "program improvement evaluation." These terms emphasize the responsibility of the evaluator for providing information of two types. In the first instance, the evaluator is called upon to provide information about the extent to which the program has been implemented in the manner in which it was described and to the group for whom it was intended. That is, are the various sponsor programs being implemented in the manner in which they were described by the sponsors, and do the groups participating in these programs possess the characteristics intended for the particular program? For example, if an Engelmann program has characteristics A, B, C, D, E, F, and G and is intended for a student population having characteristics S, T, U, V, and W, are the characteristics of the program present when implemented, and are the characteristics of the students participating in the program roughly approximate to those for whom the program was intended? Knowledge of this kind of information gathered from an implementation evaluation is of value to the decision-maker in modifying the program or, at a later time, in understanding outcome differences in programs. The institute's

study has collected some data of this type; however, it has been viewed as data which is part of a variable set to be used in explaining outcomes (approach number 1) rather than as information to be provided to decision-makers during the course of the program. Improvement, or process evaluation, provides information to decision-makers about short term outcomes or progress in the program, in order that modifications might be made at that time, rather than allowing a glaring deficiency to exist for a full year.

One might conceive of implementation and improvement evaluations related either to the evaluation of the national Follow Through program (alternative 2) or implementation and improvement evaluations related to the evaluation of the programs of Follow Through (approach 3).

Recommendations

In light of the lack of definition of what kind of study is being requested of the research institute, it is difficult to make specific recommendations. However, I will attempt to make some recommendations, general in nature, and to specify the kind of study intended when specific recommendations are made:

1. There are several kinds of evaluations that might be appropriate, and which are very much needed considering the expenditure of funds for the Follow Through program. In my view, the work done by the institute to date is primarily related to approach number 1 (above). It does not serve, therefore, the purposes of evaluation specified in approaches 2 or 3. Thus I cannot vouch for the worth of the approximately four million dollars already expended. However, the experience that the institute has gained to date in understanding the program, in working with Follow Through sponsors, and with Local Educational

Agencies places them in a superior position to conduct a reasonable evaluation within the next year, well worth the dollar expenditure anticipated for that year. Moreover, they have already gathered data which would, presumably, be useful in a future evaluation. Thus, the first general recommendation is that the institute's Evaluation Study of the Follow Through Program should be continued for one more year.

2. Prior to the collection of any further data, prior to the development of additional instruments, prior to additional arrangements for field testing, prior to any further analyses of data, there is a necessity for the focus of the study to be clarified. I do not believe that this can be done by the parties involved without outside assistance. I would, therefore, suggest that either a panel be convened to work with the institute and Follow Through officials in mapping the evaluation plan for next year, a contract be extended for such a purpose, or that the PPE Office of BESE obtain advice and assist in the reformulation of the project.

3. Without attempting to second guess the nature of the reformulation of the project, it would be my view that a Summative Evaluation: The Sponsor Programs of National Follow Through (alternative 3, page 4) would be the most appropriate approach for the coming year. If this is the case, then the modifications of the present proposal suggested within the comments on that section perhaps could be further clarified and developed.